

A PLEA FOR Talapatras

March 20, 1970
The Rising Nepal

—A Peter Burleigh

One of the most important, and until recently neglected, sources of Nepali history is the palm leaf grant document known as *talapatra*. These deeds, traditionally the mode by which land tenureship was officially acknowledged and/or transferred, often but not always contain some information which proves important for the historian. The *talapatra* is typically a long (up to 28 inches) and thin (usually no more than one and one-half inches wide), rolled strip of palm leaf. The deed describes the land involved (especially emphasizing boundaries), the previous owner or donor and the new owner or recipient of the grant. The date of the transaction is marked in some detail according to the dictates of the traditional Hindu calendar. Usually there is a clay seal at the beginning of the grant with the word "sri" or the name of the ruling king imprinted on it. Often, too, the ruling king is noted in the text of the grant,

either as the donor himself or note is made of him as ruling on the day of the transaction.

For historical purposes, and especially as an aid in discovering the regnal periods of some of the kings of the Malla period, the grants have already proved most valuable. Like *silapatra* and *thyasaphu* (Newari journals and diaries), *talapatra* help establish important links in previously obscure Nepali history. For example, while attempting a study of the later Malla kings of Patan (from Sivasimha to Tejanarasimha), I found a *talapatra* which gives an important date for the regnal career of Sivasimha. According to the *talapatra* in Nepal samvat 718 in the month of Karttika (October 1597 A.D.), Sivasimha granted some land to a Patan resident. Sivasimha, who is well known as the ruler of Kathmandu at that time, is described as *manigaladhipati* (lord of Manigal) which is the title

reserved for the ruler of Patan. The grant is witnessed (sakshi) by Sivasimha's son, Hariharasimha. Previous to the discovery of this *talapatra*, the earliest mention of Sivasimha as ruler of Patan had been Nepal Samvat 719 in the month of Bhadra (see Sankaramana Rajavamshi, "Siddhinarasimha mallabhandagadika patanka sasakaharuka kehi tadapatra", *Purnima* XII, page 20). The last date yet discovered for Purandarasimha, Sivasimha's predecessor in Patan, is Nepal samvat 717 in the month of Jyestha. Thus we know, as a result of evidence found in the *talapatra*, that the line of rulers of Patan which came from a local noble family (*mahapatra*) which had begun with Visnusimha, ended sometime between May and October of A.D. 1597 with the reassertion of Malla (in the embodiment of Sivasimha Malla of Kathmandu) rule.

Many *talapatra* are in the possession of residents

of the Kathmandu Valley. They are now not considered valid proof of landownership and have thus been consigned to dusty corners and tin boxes in many homes. They are rightly valued by many families as evidence of their ancestors' status and importance during the Malla period. However, it is clear that a most important function would be served if these documents were voluntarily deposited in a central location, such as the Bir Library, where they would be cared for and catalogued and thus become like the colophons of the many Sanskrit, Maithili, Newari and Nepali manuscripts at the Library, important resource materials for historians. This is one of several ways that the residents of the Valley, who take an appropriately proud year of the history of Nepal, can assist in the important work of piecing together the medieval history of the country.